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Trends. The Pros and Cons of Decapitation: An Example from Dagestan

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No. This is not a primer on aspects of criminology or law enforcement. It also does not cover the joys of serial murder--although war may be considered as such. Instead, this article explores the pros and cons of destroying or severely degrading the strategic command, control, and communication (C3) assets of a politico-military adversary--i.e., decapitation. Although often explored in scenarios of thinking the unthinkable--viz., a full-scale nuclear war--the pros and cons of decapitation have become relevant in a number of military and paramilitary skirmishes in the post-Cold War world. An example is the ongoing conflict between Russian military forces and so-called Islamic militants allegedly seeking to establish an Islamic state in Dagestan and beyond.

Destroying or severely degrading an adversary's C3 assets can make it very difficult for that adversary to effect a coherent military offensive and defensive strategy. On the other hand, one can no longer negotiate an end to a struggle, because there is no central authority with whom to communicate. Thus, one may continue to suffer casualties. In fact, one may soon be facing a number of very coherent entities each of which present formidable problems even without their possessing an overriding, coherent strategy.

Russia's military authorities seem to have decided to bomb Chechen assets as a vehicle to victory in a manner analogous to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces bombing Serbian assets. However, NATO did not seriously attempt to destroy or severely degrade the single central Serbian authority: Slobodan Milosevic. NATO chose not to seek decapitation--even as some Serbian opponents of Milosevic advocated and advocate that he be hung--and thus preserved the option of negotiating an end to military conflict at its discretion.

The Russians seem to have made the alternative decision to eradicate all enemies, especially the two alleged leaders: Shamil Basayev and Khattab. There are several problems with this. First, the leaders seem difficult to find and attack. Second, there may well be more than two leaders. Third, the nature of the present Islamic militant threat may suggest that when heads are cut off, others will appear. Fourth, by attacking Chechnya, the Russians are having a negative effect on the Chechen President, Aslan Mashadov, an authority willing to try and bring an end to the conflict but with little authority over the militants.

Decapitation may characterize two issues in waging politico-military conflict. One is how to affect an adversary's C3 assets. The other is the quality of thinking about waging politico-military conflict. As to the latter, many observers may ask, as romantics may be sleepless in Seattle are the Russians headless in Moscow? (See Benjamin, R.D. (1998). Negotiation and evil: The sources of religious and moral resistance to the settlement of conflicts. *Mediation Quarterly*, 15, 245-266; Gordon, M.R. (September 28, 1999). Imitating NATO: A script is adapted for Chechnya. *The New York Times*, p. A3; Hartzell, C.A. (1999). Explaining the stability of negotiated settlements to intrastate wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43, 3-22; Milburn, T.W. (1998). Psychology, negotiation, and peace. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 7, 109-119; Stuhlmacher, A. F., et al. (1998). The impact of time pressure in negotiation: A

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meta-analysis. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9, 97-116.) (Keywords: Chechnya, Dagestan, Military Strategy, Political Psychology, Russia.)